

Affirmation:
United Methodists
for Lesbian, Gay,
Bisexual and
Transgendered
Concerns

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Transgendered Concerns
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Affirmation

Rev. Jimmy Creech is convicted

Coalition Responds to Trial of Jimmy Creech in Grand Island

We grieve for the church we love.

The action of removing the ministerial orders of the Rev. Jimmy Creech is a travesty of justice and a violation of the integrity of the ministry of the church. The second trial of the Rev. Jimmy Creech points once again to the need to change the discriminatory policies of the UMC toward LGBT persons. While the jury of thirteen Nebraska Annual Conference clergy found Jimmy guilty of disobeying the Order and Discipline of the UMC, the world finds the church guilty of upholding a law that continues to wound many in its very pews as well as in society.

In the wake of the trial, a coalition of four UM groups - Affirmation, In All Things Charity, Methodist Federation for Social Action, and Reconciling Congregation Program - encourages church members to take action against this and other unjust policies of the church through the legislative process of General Conference. We are saddened that during this time -- from today until the session convenes on May 2, 2000-- the UMC will continue to inflict grave harm to LGBT persons through its discriminatory policies and actions. We grieve the lost opportunity to witness to God's love and compassion.

The coalition has formed a sub-committee to develop legislative strategy and a plan of communication with General Conference delegates. Persons interested in participating in this effort can contact the coalition through In All Things Charity.

Our support of the inclusion of all people in the life of the church is rooted in the Gospel of Jesus Christ and fed by the Spirit's insistence that we share the message of God's powerful love. This calling is primary to living out what it means to be a Christian disciple. Until LGBT persons are brought into full participation in the life of the church, the world has great reason to question the integrity of the church's message, to ask, "Does Jesus truly love all the little children?" We have a great cloud of witnesses waiting for an answer.

A significant issue at the center of the church's struggle with sexual orientation is the character of the UMC. Historically as a denomination we have pursued dialogue in the midst of our differences. We have not been a denomination of rigid legalism. Church trials have been reserved for those cases in which injuries to persons could not be redressed by other means. We have not insisted on doctrinal or liturgical conformity. The genius of the diversity of our denomination is threatened in this struggle.

Second trial held

Rev. Jimmy Creech was brought to a church trial for performing a same-gender Holy Union service. The trial was held 17 November in Grand Island, Nebraska. It found Rev. Creech guilty and removed his ministerial orders. The trial court vote was 13 guilty, 0 not guilty. At least nine votes of guilty were necessary to convict. The jury deliberated for only two hours. Bishop William Boyd Grove, who presided over the trial, was visibly moved when the jury announce the punishment. "This is a sad day for all of us and for our church," said Grove. The bishop prayed for all who are affected by the verdict, and he asked God for healing, peace and unity in the church. He also prayed for all LGBT people who are wounded by the court's decision. "We know they abide in your care," he said. Then he offered to God this day's work. "We did not choose to do it, we were called to do it," he said.

Rev. Creech's loss of his credentials was immediate after the sentencing. Creech must submit his credentials to Nebraska Annual Conference Bishop Joel Martinez. Removal of ministerial credentials was one of a number of options that the jury had in fixing the sentence. The Book of Discipline provides for expulsion of the respondent, or defendant, from the church, suspension from pastoral ministry, or the assessment of some lesser penalty.

See Rev. Creech, page 6

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Mission Statement

Affirmation is an activist caucus of
lesbian, gay, bisexual,
transgendered people organized to
speak for ourselves.
Together we:

proclaim a gospel of respect, love
and justice;

relentlessly pursue policies and
processes that support full
participation of lesbian, gay,
bisexual, and transgendered
people in all areas and levels of
The United Methodist Church;

overcome the barriers that diminish
our common humanity by excluding
or judging people because of their
race, gender, class or physical
abilities;

empower people to undertake
works of inclusion and justice
where they are.

Affirmation Newsletter

is a quarterly publication. The
official views of Affirmation are
stated by the Co-Spokespersons.
Opinions offered in signed
columns, letters and articles are
those of the writers and do not
necessarily represent the opinions
of Affirmation.

To save space in this newsletter:
United Methodist Church = UMC
United Methodist = UM
Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and
Transgendered = LGBT

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Information

All Affirmation correspondence is
mailed discretely.

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Affirmation are tax deductible.

Rev. Dell's appeal

Rev. Greg Dell, who made history last March when he was convicted for performing a Holy Union for a gay couple in his congregation, could be assigned to a charge next July.

On 17 September, nine members and six reserve members [both clergy and laity] of the North Central Jurisdiction's Committee on Appeals upheld the verdict that Dell broke church law, but it ruled that the penalty was flawed because a suspension must be finite. The Committee on Appeals decided to end Dell's penalty without any further conditions after one year [5 July 1999 to 30 June 2000].

The Committee on Appeal followed paragraph 2627g in the *Book of Discipline* which states, "The appellate body shall determine two questions only: [1] Does the weight of the evidence sustain the charge or charges? [2] Were there such errors of church law as to vitiate the verdict and/or the penalty? These questions shall be determined by the records of the trial and the argument of counsel for the Church and for the respondent. The Committee on Appeals shall in no case hear witnesses."

Rev. Larry Pickens, Dell's attorney: "We think the trial court did not apply the evidentiary standard of clear and convincing evidence in relation to the verdict... The penalty is unconstitutional in that it's an indefinite penalty designed to extract a pledge based on future action."

When Rev. Dell was asked if he would perform another same-gender union again, he replied, "I'm certainly not going to change the character of my ministry -- ministry to all people."

"My hope remains that at the May 2000 [GC] meeting, our denomination will have the grace and humility to say we have a long way to go before reaching a faith consensus on issues surrounding sexual orientation," Dell said. "As we make that statement of the obvious, we must change the legislative and judicial atmosphere from its present hostility to one of generosity and charity."

Northern Illinois Bishop Sprague, who brought the charges against Dell, wrote, "The clear and reasoned decision of the Committee on Appeals both affirms due process and the verdict, and alleviates the uncertainty the prior sentence imposed on Greg Dell, Broadway UMC Church [where the Holy Union took place], and all others affected."

Rev. Dell was elected to be one of Northern Illinois' clergy delegate to GC. Since his suspension is during the May GC, Dell will not be a delegate but plans on attending. ▽

Planning for General Conference

The General Conference of The United Methodist Church meets once a quarter. The subjects of homosexuality and the heterosexism and homophobia of the church will be major issues at General Conference [GC] 2000, which will take place May 2-12 in Cleveland Ohio. Affirmation's National Council has been preparing for GC 2000 over the last two years. In preparation, we have drafted and circulated a platform of proposed legislation, including proposed changes to the Discipline and Social Principles and proposed resolutions for the Book of Resolutions. Last fall, representatives from several national and regional caucuses and groups advocating full inclusion regardless of sexual orientation began to work together toward GC. Out of that group came a working Coalition, made up of Affirmation, The Methodist Federation for Social Action, and the Reconciling Congregation Program, and including representatives who know the work of CORNET, In All Things Charity, A Matter of Justice and Shalom Ministries. Last Spring the coalition formed two sub-committees, dealing with logistics and legislation. The first, working on logistics and presence, is planning just that, the logistics of our joint presence at GC, including meeting spaces, housing for volunteers, newsletter facilities, worship times and a resource room. Judy WestLee represents Affirmation on the Logistics sub-committee. Several developments have made the work of the logistics sub-committee difficult, including the decision of the GC Commission not to release rooms they hold until delegates are housed and rapid turn-over and renovation in the hospitality industry. As we write, the work is

See GC Plans, page 3

GC Plans from page 2

underway, but plans are not yet firm. Nonetheless, volunteers can begin or continue their plans to be present, knowing that there will be hotel rooms set aside for volunteers to rent and that there will be much to do.

The Legislative sub-group has developed plans to raise money for its work, to evaluate and contact delegates before GC and to coordinate our strategic presence at GC. Affirmation people who have volunteered to deal with legislative issues at recent GC may remember that they were encouraged to work with and through MFSA, which had developed a rigorous and effective pattern of observation and communication toward influencing decisions in committees and on the floor. We will work together again this year, but not under the auspices of MFSA. Instead, interested people from all three caucuses will convene each evening at 10:30 to develop on-going legislative strategies together. Jeanne Knepper has represented Affirmation on the Legislative sub-committee. ▽

Making a difference in Cleveland

Often many of us ask "What can I do that would really make a difference in how the United Methodist Church views LGBT persons?" There is something you can do. You can work with us at General Conference [GC] 2000, May 2-12 in Cleveland, Ohio!

Here are some possibilities of service with Affirmation:

- Help staff the hospitality/resource room co-sponsored by Affirmation, Reconciling Congregation Program [RCP] and Methodist Federation for Social Action [MFSA].
- Help us conduct morning worship services.
- Do data entry into computers for our daily newsletter.
- Write articles for our daily newsletter.
- Help in the production of our daily newsletter [photocopying, collating, etc.]
- Mail via postal mail and e-mail our daily newsletter to contributors requesting them.
- Hand out our daily newsletter to delegates as they arrive at the convention center every day at 8 am and greet them with a welcoming smile - showing that LGBT people don't bite.
- Be a pastoral counselor to all who request such services.
- Be a runner between the convention center and the joint office of Affirmation-RCP-MFSA.
- Be the coordinator and/helper of Day Trip Rejuvenations for volunteers.
- Give your input to the daily legislative strategic meetings at 10:30 p.m.
- Help our sister organizations - RCP and MFSA - in their efforts [example: MFSA will be offering free-will offering breakfast and lunch to our 3 groups' volunteers. MFSA will need assistance in food preparation [sandwich making, etc.] We have a long tradition of helping each other for our common goals.

Significantly being visible in the hallways between sessions, at committee meetings, in restaurants and hotel lobbies wearing Affirmation t-shirts or pins to allow delegates to get to know a living breathing LGBT person in a non-threatening way. Research shows that being visible is the single best way to help people overcome their homophobia. Everyone's presence is important!

GC is a great place to meet and enjoy fellowship of other Christian LGBT folk witnessing together, meeting people from all over the world, and enjoying inspiring preaching, music, and pagentry that is always part of past GCs.

For further information on registering to volunteer and how to register for hotel rooms, please contact Affirmation at P.O. Box 1021, Evanston, IL 60204-1021 or e-mail us at <affirmation@yahoo.com>. ▽

Affirmation National Council

One woman in New York

One woman in
Pennsylvania

One woman in Texas

One man in
Washington, DC

Richard Bates
Austin, TX

Sylvia Bauer
Austin, TX

John R. Calhoun
Oklahoma City, OK

W. Allison Flint
Jackson, MS

David L. Gunnell
Evanston, IL

Rick Huskey
Washington, DC

Jeanne Knepper
Portland, OR

David Meredith
Columbus, OH

Mary Padilla
Corona, NY

Deborah Robinson
Essex Junction, VT

Gary Shephard
Watauga, TX

William Webber
Somerville, NJ

Affirmation National Council

Judith WestLee
Minneapolis, MN

Mark Wilson
Washington, DC

Andrew Ulman
Allston, MA

Bishop ask to reverse same-gender union ban

Retired Bishop Jack Tuell is petitioning General Conference [GC] to remove the statement from the *Social Principles* that prohibits UM clergy from presiding over same-gender unions and allowing these ceremonies to be performed in local UM churches. "I believe UM ministers who are appointed to a variety of situations should have the right to determine the spiritual and pastoral needs of the people whom they serve," Tuell told UM News Services.

A statement was added to the *Social Principles* stating: "Ceremonies that celebrate homosexual unions shall not be conducted by our ministers and shall not be conducted in our churches." The Judicial Council, equivalent to the Supreme Court, ruled that added sentence does carry the weight of church law even though it is in the *Social Principles* section.

Tuell presided over the trial of Rev. Greg Dell. Rev. Dell was convicted for "disobedience to the order and discipline of the UMC" and suspended indefinitely from his ministerial duties because he performed a holy union service for a gay couple in his congregation. Dell's conviction was later upheld by the North Central Jurisdiction's Committee on Appeals. However, the suspension was defined by just under a year.

Tuell stated in his letter to GC's lay and clergy delegates: "After two long days of presiding over Rev. Dell's trial last March, I was totally convinced that the legislation of 1996 was not good legislation and should be changed by the 2000 GC." ▽

20 retired New England Bishops call to perform Holy Union

Twenty retired United Methodist clergy from the New England Conference have expressed their willingness to co-officiate at covenant services for same-gender couples and have invited other retired clergy in New England to join them. They have also expressed their intention to seek the removal of the prohibition against conducting same-gender covenant services from the *Book of Discipline* at the next General Conference.

Their letter titled "Blessing Same Gender Covenants" was printed in the New England Conference newspaper *Crosscurrents*. Their statement is dated September 10, 1999.

"We are troubled that in our current social landscape homophobia grips our people, their letter stated. " The language of hate and actions of violence express contempt for the thoughts, feelings, and space of others. We fear people we take little time to know. We fail to listen carefully to our sisters and brothers. We believe the compassion of Christ needs to be experienced by all people, and especially in our church through our pastors and our congregations."

"We believe loving covenants between persons are rich and wholesome acts. We are called now and again as UM pastors to preside over blessing ceremonies as diverse as the needs of the persons in our care. We are free, in Christ's name, to offer - or refrain from offering - blessings of homes, of families, of journeys, even of pets. At this point we are forbidden to offer a blessing upon the covenant of faithfully shared love between persons of same gender. [Not every UM Pastor is required to offer this particular blessing, but every UM Pastor must be free to follow the leading of Christ's Spirit in making this decision.] The very authority of our ministry finds its empowerment through this freedom."

The letter called upon clergy "to co-officiate when called upon by other clergy-members of our Conference for the sake of pastoral care for all God's people." It ended by with asking all UM people to work at removing the prohibition against conducting same-gender Holy Unions. ▽

UM Campground discrimination

A UM Committee found at the Historic Methodist Campgrounds [near Chicago] in Des Plaines, IL, a "pattern of discrimination." This campground was where a gay couple was not allowed to rent a summer cottage earlier this year.

Originally, former Affirmation member, Bob Carroll, his partner, Russell Elenz, and their foster son were not allowed to buy a cottage at the co-op campground lack approval from the campground's board. A straight co-op owner then arrange for the couple to rent their cottage. The campground board terminated the straight couple's rights by kicking the straight couple out of their cottage. The gay couple filed a civil complaint with the County's Humans Right Commission. Northern Illinois UMC was brought into the middle of the litigation as co-respondents with the campground in the complaint. "The campground does not exclude anyone because of sexual preference," said campground attorney, John Juergensmeyer. "Discrimination because of sexual orientation just did not occur." The campground states that the gay couple was not approved because they violated certain bylaws. These violations have never been brought to light.

There is a 140-year tie with the campground and the UMC, but there are many questions as to if the campground is privately owned or owned by the UMC. Regardless, according to campground's bylaws, each UM church in the Northern Illinois Conference is allowed one vote on the campground's board. Local church delegates announced they were coming to the campground's next annual meeting to observe and not to vote. The campground board encouraged the UM churches to attend their annual meeting. On the date of the annual meeting, the UM delegates were locked out of the campground and met by canine police in riot gear. The police were notified by the campground that a thousand unwelcome people were going to show up at their annual meeting. The UM delegates were not allowed to enter or attend the meeting.

During the second week of November, the UM committee announced their recommendation that the campground remove the name "Methodist" and the denomination's cross and flame logo from its property and material. ▽

A response to the conviction and suspension of The Rev. Greg Dell

But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves in Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

--Galatians 3: 25-28

...though we do not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching.

--Social Principles, 1972

On September 19, 1998, the Rev. Greg Dell officiated at a covenant service between two members of his congregation, Keith Eccarius and Karl Reinhardt. For this act of pastoral leadership and compassion, Rev. Dell was charged with disobedience to the order and discipline of The UMC, tried and convicted on March 26, 1999, and, on July 5, 1999, suspended from the exercise of ministry until he signs a pledge never to celebrate another same-gender covenant service or until the UM law against such services is repealed. In Greg Dell's trial the UMC spent more than \$120,000 to remove from ministry a man who was universally regarded as an exemplary pastor.

Meanwhile, in the interval between September 19 and March 26, Matthew Shepard was tied to a rural fence, pistol-whipped and left to freeze to death near Laramie, Wyoming; Peter Garcia was stabbed to death in New York City; Billy Jack Gaither was beaten to death with a baseball bat and burned on a stack of old tires in the middle of a road outside of Sylacauga, Alabama; and Henry Edward Northington was beheaded in Richmond, Virginia. Nor were these hate-filled murders of gay men, awful as they were, the whole picture. The Southern Poverty Law Center tells us that 21 gay or lesbian Americans were murdered because of their sexual orientation in 1996. The FBI reports over 1000 anti-gay hate incidents in 1996. Moreover, anti-gay hate crimes are routinely distinguished by the extremity of their violence and brutality.

Affirmation cannot look at the trial of Greg Dell apart from this awful frame of violence. We are appalled, but not surprised, that our church can invest so much time, money and energy in punishing a pastor who takes our lives as "people of sacred worth" seriously, even as it largely ignores the real crime/anti-gay violence and the rhetoric that supports it. Arthur Dong, an award-winning filmmaker who has studied gay-bashing, concludes: "Homosexuality is condemned in churches, classrooms, at the dinner table, in the halls of the Senate. And minds nurtured in that atmosphere think they have a license to murder." We charge The UMC with nurturing the atmosphere that supports murder, with complicity in the murders of Shepard, Garcia, Gaither, Northington, and so many others.

In 1972, The UMC proclaimed a deadly lie, that the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching. This lie had several components: that Christians are united in their understanding of homosexuality; that homosexuality is a "practice," a chosen behavior, and not a part of the created order; that people choose this practice over against the will of God; that lesbians and gay men living in relationship are, by definition, not living as God would have them live.

Even in 1972, many knew that this was a lie. From the beginning, UM

See Dell, page 13

Creech article in OUT magazine

So what that there is another article about Rev. Jimmy Creech? Rev. Creech has been listed in OUT and the Advocate magazines as a straight supporter for LGBT issues in past issues.

The November 1999 issue of "OUT" Magazines is not just another article recognizing Rev. Creech's support, but it is also about Jimmy, the person: "The quiet American hero" is the title of Lisa Kennedy's article. Ms. Kennedy explains the legal issues as they relate to Creech's church trial and his current charges. Kennedy's article also delves into how Jimmy's belief made into action, and why he is willing to give it all up for what he believes in. Her article is "a story about love."

"We are not the sole objects of that love. We are merely the beneficiaries of his authentic ideas, of his greater, deeper, abiding affection. Not that our boy [Jimmy] would be very happy to be called a hero, believing as he does that heroism is the thing. Knowing that the heroic is available to us all and, indeed, must be the responsibility of us all. So while his title may be in question, his love isn't. That this is a love story puts it in a kind of peril these days, fond as we've grown of the dark, the hateful, the contentious. Not that this tale is without the dark, the hateful, the contentious. But for it to remain true, this must be fundamentally a story about love."

Along with Kennedy's article is a side column about other organized religious conflicts over the homosexual issue. ▽

Rev. Creech from page 1

Rev. Creech did not put on a defense nor did he participate in the selection of the jury because he felt "the law was unjust and the whole trial is corrupted. The trial is illicit." He allowed church counsel to pick the jurists. Creech said, "I don't feel morally bound by *this* law."

In a statement before the trial, Creech said, "It is not in the best interest of the UMC for this trial to take place. [It will be] an act of violence against GLBT and a betrayal of the gospel of Jesus Christ and all who participate in it will be complicit. [The upcoming trial] will be a waste of resources -- money, time, energy, and personnel -- that should be used otherwise in positive, helpful ministries to people in need in the world." The UMC trial that found Rev. Greg Dell of Chicago guilty cost the UMC \$115,221.01 to prosecute. This figure does not include the defense's expenditures.

"This trial belongs to everyone" said Creech, "to all LGBT people and their families against whom this trial is an act of violence; to all who love justice and want to end the persecution of LGBT people by The UMC and other Christian churches; and, to all who grieve the UMC's renunciation, in the cause of bigotry, of Christ's unconditional love and welcome extended to all people."

Larry Ellis, one of the men that Jimmy Creech performed the Holy Union blessing, said, "We had no desire to be poster children for gay unions, but we could not let Jimmy take all the heat, let him make sacrifices, and

[we] remain quiet and safe." For this they have made their wedding album public on the Internet at <www.geocities.com/~leeralnc>, as well as being in the public eye. Ellis and his partner, Jim Raymer, wanted their Holy Union to be a secret. "Nobody knew until people got their invitations," said Ellis. Initially, they were to have their Holy Union performed by their pastor at their United Church of Christ, Rick Edens, and by his co-pastor Jill Edens. When Rev. Jill Edens was unavailable, they asked Rev. Creech to partake in the services. The couple said to Jimmy, "Look, Jimmy, if you have don't want to do this, we understand. There was no question about what Creech would do. ... Jimmy is the first straight minister I've know in my life who has stood up and been so firm in presenting this case to the point that it is self-sacrificing." [from OUT magazine]

On the day before the trial, Ellis and Raymer participated with the Rev. Jimmy Creech in the renewal of their commitment and a reenactment of their union ceremony. The young gay men want the world to see this sacred rite before they condemn it. They want the UMC to be held accountable for withholding the blessing of the church from what God has blessed already.

At the start of the trial, Soulforce, a gay-rights group supportive of Creech led by Rev. Mel White, blocked the trial room doors with more than 100 Soulforce members. The three rows of arm-locked protestors, 90% whom are UM, held an all-night vigil at these doors. Grand Island police arrested 74 members of Soulforce, who had prearranged to be arrested.

At the trial, Rev. Creech did not enter a plea nor make an opening statement. Grove entered a plea of "not guilty" in lieu of Rev. Creech. As the first witness, Creech answered the church counsel's [prosecution] Rev. Steven Flader of Blair, Nebraska, questions. Flader posed a series of questions to Creech regarding the service. Did you give the call to worship? Did you give the charge? Did you officiate in the exchange of rings? Did you commission the two? Did you give the benediction? Did you pronounce them life partners? Creech's response to each question was: "I did." Flader also asked Creech if he would participate in future same-gender unions? "There is nothing that will deter me from doing that," answered Creech. A juror also questioned Creech asking him whether he understood that he was not to conduct the ceremony on the advice of the bishop. "It was very clear to me not to participate," Creech said.

See The Rev. Creech, page 12

What color is baptismal water?

I was the preacher for the Reaffirmation of Baptism service at Rocky Mountain Conference in Colorado. In our UM baptismal liturgy we say, "...we are initiated into Christ's holy church... incorporated into God's mighty acts of salvation and given new birth through water and the Spirit," by baptism.

I used as my scripture, Matthew 3:13-17, the baptism of Jesus. [This is] where Jesus suggested that baptism is of God, and is therefore more than the one baptizing or the one being baptized.

My sermon topic was stimulated by the water fountains of my childhood in North Carolina. There were in those days, next to each other, a fountain that was labeled "White," and the one "Colored." I discovered as a young child that the labels did not describe the color of the water, but rather the color of the persons who drank from the fountains.

In the sermon, I asked if the restrictions we impose upon persons in the UM who are Gay or Lesbian suggest that their baptism, their baptismal water, was of a different kind of color, than that of a majority of UM? Are we doing with baptized persons who are homosexual, what those "White" and "Colored" water fountains did to persons who were white or Black? Is there a first class baptism that condones limits on the ministry that some persons can receive from the church or offer within the church?

I then shared how the church, at various times, has restricted the participation of persons, although duly baptized, for a variety of reasons. In time, these restrictions were then eliminated as the church sought to be responsive to God, rather than to the prevailing cultural and political mores of the moment.

At one time in Methodism, social dancing, access to white churches by African-Americans, ordination of women, and divorce by clergy, were all viewed with reservations and restrictions, imposed by rules and action by church leadership.

Our resistance to active homosexuals in ordained ministry and same-gender unions, is a cultural/political response, masquerading as a theological/biblical response.

I predict that the time is coming when homosexual persons will, without restriction, be full participants in every aspect of the UMC, just as social dancers, African-Americans, ordained women, and those who are divorced, now fully participate.

I pray and hope that time is not far off.

Baptism that has given all of us "new birth," in and through the church, ought no longer be disregarded because of a person's sexual orientation!

*Rev. Gilbert Caldwell
first printed in UM Reporter
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Ban on unofficial identifying labels extends to local churches

The Judicial Council recently ruled that local congregations may not "label" themselves as part of unofficial movements/organizations such as "Reconciling Congregation" or "Transforming Congregation." Such labeling, the Council said, "is divisive and makes the local church subject to the possibility being in conflict with the Book of Discipline."

The case was brought by the Northwest Texas Annual Conference. Last summer, this annual conference passed a resolution that all its local congregations had 45 days to divest themselves of any such labels. However, Bishop Alfred Norris, who presided over the conference, said that they did not have the authority to adopt this resolution under the Book of Discipline. The Council overturned the bishop's decision.

This recent ruling was adding local congregations to the Judicial Council's list. Back in October 1988, the Judicial Council ruled that no churchwide agencies and annual conferences could not take on such labels. ▽

Views

The official views of Affirmation are stated by the Co-Spokespersons. Opinions offered in signed columns, letters and articles are those of the writer and do not necessarily represent the opinions of Affirmation. We welcome those with opposing views to write.

Thoughts on the Judicial Ruling

[See "Ban on unofficial identifying labels extends to local churches," page 7]

I was not surprised by this ruling. I muttered when I read it, but I wasn't surprised. The "powers that be" in the UMC, it seems to me, are doing their level best to make the entire issue of inclusion/discrimination against same gender people just go away and pretend there is no issue here to discuss. Groups such as Affirmation, Reconciling Congregation Program and MFSA refuse to be quiet and/or go away.

Remember the headline of the Affirmation daily newsletter at the General Conference in 1996? The morning after the vote to leave the language in the *Book of Discipline* as it was, and to add the footnote in the *Social Principles* saying it was now a chargeable offense to "conduct" a same-gender union service. The headline that April morning in 1996 read: "We'll See You in Cleveland!" - which referred to the General Conference in 2000.

We were saying we have planted our flag. We are not going away.

It certainly would be easy for me personally to walk away from the UMC. The UMC has turned its back to me. I wasn't raised as a UMC member; I was raised a Missouri Lutheran. But, I found a loving God and an understanding brother in Christ Jesus in the UMC when I was in my thirties. I believe in the Wesleyan concept of treating your neighbor as you would treat your God. I believe - as did John Wesley - we don't have to have cookie cutter belief systems in order to belong to the same denomination. I believe in social justice because I understand the world as being connected [John Wesley said: "The whole world is my parish!"]. And, yes, I could walk away at this point, but what about the other women and men - perhaps yet unborn - who are in the UMC and discover they are same gender orientated? I can't just leave them to fight a battle and to be hurt as I have been hurt. I have to at the very least do all that I can to change the system, to change the writing in the *Book of Discipline*, and, yes, to change people's understanding of who gay people are.

No, they aren't getting rid of me that easily! I truly love God; I truly love the UMC as I understand how it should be. I'm not going to sit idly by and let others corrupt it. My advice is to take a deep breath, steel your nerves and make plans to join us in Cleveland this May. We need you and everyone on this list to join us in making that witness!

Shalom!

Judy WestLee

[While the following letter from The Rev. Gil Caldwell is recent, his support is not. Affirmation thanks Gil for his long-held understanding that inclusiveness in the UMC really should mean *"everybody" is welcome.*]

Dear Colleagues,

During the height of the Civil Rights movement in the 60's, Black persons rejoiced over the presence of white and other persons who were with us in Mississippi, the March on Washington, Selma to Montgomery...

We knew they were with us, because our struggle was their struggle. They understood that none of us can be free until all of us are free. We also knew that they did not have to join with us, yet they did so, even as many of their family members and friends and many in the nation, pelted them with negative epithets.

As an African-American whose sexual orientation is heterosexual, I have for a number of years felt "called" to "come out of the closet" to express my solidarity with my sisters and brothers who are homosexual. There is no political advantage, no ego satisfaction that I derive from this speaking out. But somehow, I feel that because of my history of involvement in the struggle for racial justice, "the stones would cry out" if I did not speak out!

It is my hope that my meager and feeble efforts to contribute to the debate about homosexuality and the church will be helpful.

Always affirming and accepting, God's grace and peace,

Rev. Gil Caldwell
Park UMC of Denver, CO

Where do we stand?

[See "UMC stand on Boy Scouts' anti-gay policy muddle" on page 11]

What message are we sending? Is it or is it not okay to be a LGBT person in the UMC?

If the Boy Scouts of America have to admit gays per the General Board of Church and Society, then the UMC should start ordaining gay pastors and performing same-gender Holy Unions with the General Conference's blessing!

David Gunnell

Views

[The following is a letter to the editor written by long-time Affirmation member Morris Floyd to the *UM Circuit Rider*. The *Circuit Rider* is a publication circulated by the UM Publishing House to all UM clergy and to some lay leaders in the denomination. Morris was responding to an opinion piece by Professor William J. Abraham of Perkins School of Theology, in which Abraham suggests that pro-LGBT forces in the church have won "sensational gains" in recent years.]

William J. Abraham is entitled to his demand that "...those committed to the classical Christian tradition "keep their nerve and stay the course" during what he refers to as a coming "period of uncomfortable stability" in the denomination. [November/December 1999]. And I was impressed by what must have been - even for him - a theologically challenging acknowledgement that the Holy Spirit can work through "our noisy caucuses."

While disagreeing with him strenuously, I have previously respected the professor for what I believed to be the integrity of his views. For this reason I was very disappointed to find that he has apparently sunk to the propagandistic "big lie" approach to debate. This is the same scurrilous tactic employed sixty years ago by Nazis and more recently by the virulent anti-gay movement to drive more moderate and thoughtful persons into their fold by exploiting their ignorance and their fear of being dominated by something they do not understand. I regret to see that the editors of *Circuit Rider* allowed the phrase to stand unchallenged.

Dr. Abraham robs himself and others of a potentially important theological insight when he portrays those who support full inclusion of LGBT people in the life of the church as having won "sensational gains." I have participated in that effort for more than 25 years and it is exceedingly difficult to identify anything that would be regarded as a gain in the ordinary sense. On the contrary, since the 1972 General Conference, the polity and practice of the UMC has steadily declined in its hospitality to LGBT people. In the waning hours of that meeting sleepy delegates agreed to insert into an otherwise neutral Social Principles statement a clause declaring "the practice of homosexuality" to be "incompatible with Christian teaching."

Then and now, the *Social Principles* in effect declare many other practices to be incompatible with Christian teaching. There is a wide range of UM opinion on most of those issues. But on the question of homosexuality, leaders such as Bill Abraham require absolute adherence as a litmus test of belonging to "classical Christian tradition." As a result, the following additional negative actions have been taken:

- Prohibition of the use of General Church funds to any discussion of homosexuality that is other than negative;
- Banning "self-avowed, practicing homosexuals" from ordination or appointment as clergy or consecration of diaconal ministers;
- Setting aside the majority report of a study commission which recommended that the denomination acknowledge its disagreements on this issue rather than maintain a negative stance as if there were real consensus;
- Prohibiting UM clergy from leading rituals that celebrate the loving, committed relationships of same-gender couples.
- The General Commission on UM Men, in direct contravention of the *Social Principles*, votes to support the Boy Scouts of America in their continuing discrimination against gay boys.

Despite a series of actions considered by conservatives so decisive that they now encourage dissidents to leave the denomination, a small group of clergy and lay people continue to advocate for change on this issue. Only about one tenth of one percent of UM's have identified with this movement in any formal way. A handful of UM congregations and other entities have declared their support by becoming "Reconciling," with a similar tiny percentage of clergy saying they will disobey the unconscionable limit placed on their pastoral autonomy by the 1996 General Conference. While giving grateful thanks daily for this faithful witness, I have to ask what it means that this a small group continues its efforts, despite overwhelming opposition and little likelihood of real change in the foreseeable future?

One possible meaning is that they are obsessed, possessed, or otherwise completely out of touch with reality. But another possibility is that they continue to be sustained, indeed encouraged, by the creating, challenging Spirit of the One whom Jesus knew as a loving parent. This is the insight to which Bill Abraham blinds himself when he writes off this faithful remnant with the big lie and dares to assume that the answer to the prayer Come, Holy Spirit, come! Will be the one he is expecting.

Morris L. Floyd

Views

[Columnist Cal Thomas of Los Angeles Times Syndicate [7 Sept. 99] wrote a column titled: The secular sin of bigotry--also known as truth-telling. The column was about Thomas' support of radio show psychotherapist Dr. Laura Schlesinger [Known as "Dr. Laura." on her radio show] stand that gay men and lesbians can choose to be heterosexual.]

Dear Cal Thomas:

First, I must tell you about myself.

I am 44 years old. I live a quiet life revolving around work, family, church, and my hobbies of gardening, bicycling, and photography. I have been in a monogamous relationship for 14 years.

Until age 22, I struggled with my sexual orientation. At that time, I finally realized that no amount of prayer was going to change it. No amount of wishing on a star. By the time I turned twenty-two "hoping that it was just a phase" no longer worked. I finally admitted to myself that I was gay. Like it or not.

Second, I must say that your column really confused me.

Yes, homosexuals can change their behavior. But why would they want to? They would be denying something that they can't change, and pretending to be something that they aren't.

Been there. Done that. Didn't work.

When I was in college I had a girl friend for three years. As much as I wanted it to be there, there was no sexual attraction. There was no love. The relationship ended because of this.

My domestic partner dated and married a woman, and had a son. He finally decided that a marriage, and a child, and a lot of prayer, and a lot of expensive counseling was not going to make the "homosexual feelings" go away. It was too much work to maintain the behavior. Heterosexual was a role he had to play every minute of every day. Energy that he should have put into caring for his diabetes was instead directed into living a lie. He divorced his wife, came out to his parents, and started putting together a life that was based on his true self, not some role imposed by society. His health improved markedly.

And third, what evidence is there that ignoring or repressing one's sexual orientation is going to lead to anything besides loneliness and depression or completely unsatisfying relationships?

I know a young man who journeyed into the dark and dangerous land of deep depression battling against his sexual orientation. When he started thinking of suicide, he checked himself into a mental hospital. When his family finally found out the cause for the depression, they rallied around him. He's back from the edge. He's accepted himself. He's on his way to being a productive member of society.

I do disagree with name calling. It's unproductive. It never wins friends. You'll notice that I didn't do any of it.

In conclusion, Mr. Thomas, the reason why Dr. Laura draws such criticism from the lesbian and gay community is that we've lived the life. And we know she's wrong. That's why the lesbian and gay community will continue to call attention to her. Hopefully we'll be able to do so in a constructive manner.

Gary Shephard

Good News

In October,
when joyful trees
clap and spin,
I pity the elder brother,
so intent upon
his own righteousness
and our sin
that
he cannot see the swirling
golden coins,
and showers of rubies:
God's passionate heart
aflame
as She scatters
bits of a rainbow,
broken for us,
who are,
one and all,
Her beloved.

-Jeanne G. Knepper

"Within a system which denies the existence of basic human rights, fear tends to be the order of the day...A most insidious form of fear is that which masquerades as common sense or even wisdom, condemning as foolish, reckless, insignificant, or futile the small, daily acts of courage which help to preserve man's self-respect and inherent human dignity."

-Aung San Suu Kyi
[submitted via internet]

Council of Bishops call for unity and focus

The Council of Bishops met in Lake Junaluska, North Carolina for a week long meeting during the first week of November. From this meeting, a pastoral letter was mailed to all pastors offering "hope and encouragement" and reminding members that "making disciples of Jesus Christ" is the denomination's primary mission. It also stated not to let arguments over sensitive issues such as homosexuality distract them from the primary mission of the church. There is considerable anxiety across the UMC about the General Conference gathering in Cleveland May 2-12, where delegates will deal with many volatile issues such as homosexuality.

The 1,000-word pastoral letter, the bishops issued a "call to prayer, fasting and Christian conferencing" in preparation for the General Conference. They also agreed to initiate a period of "Christian conferencing" with their respective delegations to the conference and to provide time at their future meetings when they can explore issues related to homosexuality. The bishops voted to support a "symbol act" at the conference, particularly focused on the churchwide initiative on children and poverty, which they started.

While affirming their unity in Jesus Christ, the bishops acknowledge they are still learning how to celebrate their individual diversity. "Let no one mistake the Spirit's variety of gifts in our midst for any lack of common commitment to Jesus Christ," they declare. "Even though individual bishops may express their personal convictions, we are united in our desire to serve Christ, to lead the church faithfully, and to be a witness to the unity of the Spirit."

While some in the church fear that diversity could lead to division, the bishops say this is a "time to be quiet, to be united, to listen for God's guiding voice, and to learn from one another." To help lead this process, they are issuing the "'call to prayer, fasting and Christian conversation,' ... an invitation for the whole United Methodist Church to join us, your bishops, in the spiritual disciplines as we seek God's guidance for our church."

In their letter, the Bishops suggest that, "We offer to guide the church in all possible settings in conferencing around such issues as homosexuality. In the midst of these discussions of the issues surrounding homosexuality, we need to remember that there are real people whose lives are being victimized when the debate becomes hateful, mean-spirited, and shows a lack of concern. "In our role as shepherds of the church, we hear the anguish of many gay and lesbian persons, their parents and families, their friends, and their pastors. We ask the whole church to respond in Christian love to those who are pained by the church's struggle with the issue of homosexuality."

Bishop C. Joseph Sprague of the Chicago Area attempted to have an additional line inserted in the letter: "We yearn for their [gays and lesbians] full inclusion in the life of the church." The motion failed after Bishop Paul Duffey, Montgomery, Ala., expressed concern that such language could refer to full ordination, which the church now prohibits. Also defeated was a

See Bishops' letter, page 14

UMC's stand on Boy Scouts' anti-gay policy muddle

"UM Men support New Jersey Boy Scout appeal." "UM Board of Church and Society opposes Boy Scouts' anti-gay policy." These are just two headlines that counter the ongoing UMC stand and the Boy Scouts of America discrimination against homosexual persons.

The New Jersey Supreme Court ruled that the Boy Scouts could not discriminate against a leader who is homosexual because of the state's law against discrimination. The court ruled the Scouts are a "place of public accommodation" because they are chartered by the federal government, including the military.

The UM's *Book of Discipline* addresses Scouting in three ways, all in the realm of children's ministries:

- local churches can have Scout programs as a part of their children's ministries,
- the Board of Discipleship is to make materials available, including scouting materials,
- UM Men shall . . . "Provide resources and support for the office of Scouting ministries and the National Association of UM Scouters for training of local church, district, annual conference, and jurisdictional scouting coordinators.

From this, UM Men have filed, with the Church of the Latter Day Saints, a "friend of the court" brief to support the Scout's appeal against the New Jersey ruling. UM Men said that the Scouts have the right to set its own course without hindrance from the government. Whereas, the General Board of Church and Society argues from *Social Principles* that homosexuals should have equal rights to employment.

Both organizations can support their actions from church law because the UMC has not addressed this question directly--it hasn't come up before now, so there is nothing in the *Discipline* that determines the answer without argument. And there won't be, until General Conference or the Judicial Council takes up the issue.

The Rev. Creech

from page 6

"Did you consider this a marriage?" Flader asked. "I considered it a marriage," Creech said. "It's equivalent to a marriage."

Rev. Creech did not put on a defense. However, he made a closing statement that was nearly an hour in length and urged the jury of Nebraska pastors to return with "no verdict."

"My dear colleagues, this is truly a sad day in the history of the UMC," Creech said as he began his closing statement, "This trial is an act of violence against GLBT people."

Rev. Creech told the jury that they were people of good will and they should uphold just and honorable laws because laws help us live out our lives as UM. "But this law is unjust," Creech said. "This law contaminates justice. You have been asked to uphold a law which is wrong. You are about to do something that is unjust and violent. The priority as a Christian puts our call above injury, harm and suffering that causes violence against our brothers and sisters. We are called to be beloved in the UMC."

Rev. Creech said that that UM clergy should not mistreat GLBT people. In 1972, when the *Social Principles* were placed in the *Book of Discipline*, he recalled how the paragraph dealing with human sexuality was added as an amendment from the floor of General Conference - an amendment stating that homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching. "This created a major wound in our body," Creech said. He equated "heterosexism" with racism, and said the church makes same-gender orientation a basis for spiritual violence.

Creech said the church's rule represented bad theology, or "dualistic theology." He talked about how the 1984 General Conference prohibited the appointment and ordination of gays and lesbians. Throughout his remarks, Creech never used the word "homosexual," instead using the terms "gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people."

"The church's laws condemn people for who they are", said Creech. "What we did when we denied ordination, we degraded it. We said in addition to gifts and graces, one must have the right sexual orientation."

Creech shared some of his conversations with gay pastors who he counsels in North Carolina. "They were tired of living a lie," he said. He referred to the violence that has been directed at LGBT people. He went again over the two same-gender ceremonies for which he has been tried - the 1997 service in Omaha, Neb., which led to his trial and acquittal in March 1998, and the April 1999 ceremony in Chapel Hill, N.C., which led to the current trial. He told of the life experiences of the people involved. In each case, the couple had thought this step through before they came to him, he said.

"Putting church rules and institution above ministry to people is idolatry," he said. "I have always placed the people of God above the institution of the church."

If the United Methodist Church waits until the General Conference in 2000, 2004 or 2008 to change its rules, more people will die, more families will be broken, more spouses will be broken, Creech said. "We begin to change today," he said.

Creech went through the jury's options of finding him "guilty" or "not guilty," and he gave a third option. He urged the jurors to return with "no verdict" as a sign that they would not participate in this "unjust law of the church."

Rev. Creech, a member of the Nebraska Annual Conference, was acquitted for performing a Holy Union at First UM Church in Omaha in March 1998. Nebraska's Bishop Martinez did not reappoint Rev. Creech to First UM Church. Jimmy Creech now resides in North Carolina with his family, while taking a leave of absence, and this is where the Holy Union took place.

More information about Jimmy Creech, including over 50 news articles, is at:
<<http://www.umaffirm.org/cornet/jcomaha.html>>. ▽

source: Chicago Sun Times, UM News Services, and CORNET's updates

Dell

from page 5

have known that some lesbians and gay men were faithful and committed Christians. From the beginning, The UMC has known that faithful Christian UMs disagree about the evaluation of homosexuality. While it is very clear that some UM believe that the "practice of homosexuality" is incompatible with Christian teaching, it is just as obvious that others, equally faithful and equally Christian, do not share that belief. The pretense that we are unified in a belief that some of us find both false and vicious grows increasingly difficult, and therefore costly, to sustain.

For 27 years, The UMC has proclaimed this deadly lie. It is deadly to lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and transgendered people everywhere, but it is particularly deadly to our youth. No less a body than the United States Department of Health and Human Services has determined that, "Family religious beliefs can be a primary reason for parents forcing youth to leave home if a homosexual orientation is seen as incompatible with church teachings." That body concluded that, "Faiths that condemn homosexuality should recognize how they contribute to the rejection of gay youth by their families and [to] suicide among lesbian and gay male youth."

The lie is deadly to families, encouraging denunciation and rejection that leads to estrangement and heart-rending pain.

And the lie is deadly to the church itself. In the last 27 years, the church has sacrificed much of its identity and strength to sustain the lie:

- it has sacrificed Biblical literacy, as it elevated limited understandings of a few short Biblical passages above the testimony of Scripture that God loves us all and that faith in Christ surmounts all division;
- it has ignored the requirement of its Constitution that there be no discrimination based on race, color, national origin, status, or economic condition, in United Methodism;
- it has turned from its long Wesleyan tradition of evaluating candidates for ministry by the gifts, grace and fruits of their ministries;
- it has denied the principle, established in the Articles of Religion, that pastors may adapt services to congregational needs;
- it has rejected the recommendation of its own Committee To Study Homosexuality, arrived at after four years of prayerful study and dialogue; and
- it has contorted relationships between church boards and agencies, making the Council on Finance and Administration a watchdog over the content of board and agency programming.

For years, the church's loyalty to the lie has driven gifted and gracious lesbians and gay men from ordained ministry. Now, we see the church going yet farther, expending great effort to drive those who will not discriminate against us out of the pastorate, destroying its own ministry, all in the defense of a lie. Consequently, we are not surprised that the Church has levied such a harsh penalty on Greg Dell. We are not surprised that some annual conferences have seen attempts to legislate how pastors may articulate their beliefs, about homosexuality, about Christ, about God. We are not surprised by multiple appeals to bishops to lay down the law. All of this is the nature of insisting that a lie is truth.

But God will not be controlled by fearful minds or rigid laws. Even as some within the Church insist that they need greater and greater control over the life of the people of God, the One who Loves confounds their efforts by continuing to call faithful people, LGBT, and straight, into ministry, into relationship, into courage, into action.

Will the lie kill The UMC? It might. But we hope not. We pray that the church will yet have the courage and humility necessary to admit that it is lying, to turn to reliance on God's love and grace, to examine its behavior, to make amends, to begin anew.

To our friends and fellow Christians of The UMC, we say this: we are here among you, now and always. We are Christian, faithful, loved and called by God, called into relationship and into God's service and ministry. The lie that we are not is destroying you and killing us. Please, for the love of God, open your eyes, open your hearts, open your minds, and embrace God's love for us all. End the violence of tongue and heart. Let us live together as one people, united by our baptism, seamless in our love of Christ. ▽

Bishops' letter

from page 11

motion by Bishop Lindsey Davis of the Atlanta Area to add the line: "We also hear the anger and frustration from those who have grown weary of our continual debate of these issues."

Some African bishops opposed the letter, arguing homosexuality is a "taboo" topic and unquestionably a sin in their respective cultures. "Homosexuality is not just a taboo, it is a word completely strange," said Bishop Nkulu Natandu Ntambo of the North Katanga Area.

"We write to remind all UM persons," continues the letter, "not to be distracted from our primary mission as a church by arguments over sensitive issues. We live in a world that is filled with injustice, racism, hate crimes, hungry children, warfare, poverty, confusion over issues of sexuality, disease, and violence. We are called to bear witness to a God who so loved the world that God "gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him might not perish but have everlasting life" [John 3:16]. We are committed to keeping our primary energy focused upon the mission of Christ to this world which God loves.." ▽

Have a Merry Christmas
and see you next year
at General Conference
on May 2-12, 2000
in Cleveland Ohio.
We need your help!

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